

STRENGTHENING CORRECTIONAL CULTURE:

EIGHT WAYS CORRECTIONS LEADERS CAN SUPPORT THEIR STAFF TO REDUCE RECIDIVISM

INTRODUCTION

Every organization struggles with change. Fostering a culture that supports change in a corrections organization can be particularly challenging. Staff require strong leadership, structure, and clear policies and practices that help them succeed at their jobs. When any one of those factors changes, it is not unusual to see reactions ranging from mild anxiety to rigid resistance.

Historically, corrections staff have had a straightforward mandate: to protect the safety and security of people who are incarcerated. But today, reducing recidivism is a core focus for corrections leaders, and as a result, corrections staff are also expected to help prepare people to return to their communities after incarceration. This objective often translates to a new way of doing business across state corrections systems, but more significantly, it impacts the directives given to managers and front-line staff who are now also tasked with implementing approaches and practices that have been shown to reduce recidivism.

The Statewide Adult Recidivism Reduction Program

In 2012, the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) launched the Statewide Adult Recidivism Reduction (SRR) Program to support states that are seeking to design and implement a comprehensive plan to reduce recidivism through research-based strategies and system-level reform. Among the most critical priorities of the SRR Program is to institute evidence-based practices (EBPs) and core correctional practices (CCPs) with fidelity across corrections, probation, and parole. A number of states have received grants to pursue this intensive, collaborative process that brings the governor, state policymakers, and corrections leaders together to set measurable recidivism-reduction goals and develop practical, data-driven plans to achieve those goals.

Since 2014, nine states—Arizona, Connecticut, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Minnesota, Nevada, and Vermont—have received additional funding to move forward and implement those plans. Based on their collective experience, policymakers and corrections leaders in these states have shared lessons learned about the demands and opportunities associated with realigning correctional culture to reduce recidivism.

Corrections leaders across the country have faced challenges in cultivating staff buy-in to new policies, practices, and ongoing activities intended to reduce recidivism. They have seen firsthand that organization-wide change is hard and know that they need to use new approaches to help their staff succeed in the recidivism-reduction effort. Below are eight ways corrections leaders can set their staff up for success, bring staff at all levels on board, and ultimately strengthen recidivism-reduction initiatives.

1 Assess the organizational climate.

The first step to tackling a change in organizational culture is to find out what staff think about the organization. Corrections leaders can then launch their recidivism-reduction initiatives with sensitivity to the concerns and priorities of their staff. A key target for organizational climate assessment is mid-level management, who can make or break any effort to change because they are responsible for ensuring commitment to the recidivism-reduction initiative from front-line corrections staff.

Ask mid-level management to complete a climate questionnaire like the one below. Information gleaned from the questionnaire may then be used to anticipate where you might encounter internal opposition, how you should tailor your communication strategy accordingly, what staff you can ask to serve as ambassadors, and what motivates your staff to succeed. Obtaining a sense of the climate enables corrections leaders to compare the current circumstances with the ideal future of the organization, identify strengths and areas for improvement, and ask the following questions: Where is the organization now? Where do we want to be? How can we get there?

Correctional Climate Questionnaire¹

Geared toward mid-level management, this questionnaire may be circulated via email, through an online survey platform, or discussed openly in staff meetings.

1. In one sentence, describe what you think the citizens of your state would say they expect from the department of corrections (DOC).
2. Have there been any adverse events—such as an injury to a staff member or lawsuits against the DOC—that drive certain practices or policies or have influenced your ability to implement reentry and recidivism-reduction initiatives? If so, what are these events?
3. Who are the greatest sources of resistance to new initiatives within the DOC? Who are the greatest sources of support for new initiatives?

1. This questionnaire was developed by Roger Werholtz, former secretary of the Kansas Department of Corrections. It is used with permission from Roger Werholtz.

-
4. What is the greatest source of resistance to new initiatives from outside of the DOC?
What is the greatest source of support?
 5. Whose support for new initiatives is the most important to obtain within the DOC?
Whose support from *outside* of the DOC is the most important to obtain?
 6. What does the DOC do best?
 7. What are the DOC's greatest vulnerabilities?
 8. How do you think each of the groups listed below would answer questions 6 and 7?
 - Legislators
 - News media
 - Prosecutors
 - Law enforcement
 - Victims/victim advocates
 - Correctional population/their families/their advocates
 - Judges
 - Other internal and external partners
 9. What aspect of the DOC are you most proud of?
 10. What aspect of the DOC do you think other DOC staff are most proud of?
 11. What words or phrases do skeptical staff use to describe new reentry-oriented initiatives?
 12. What has to change both internally and externally for your efforts to be optimally successful?

2 Demonstrate commitment from the top.

Corrections leaders must show that they are fully engaged in implementing the recidivism-reduction initiative in order for the rest of the staff to follow suit. For the objectives of an SRR initiative to become ingrained in the fabric of your organization, you should place the same level of emphasis on recidivism-reduction activities as you do on security and containment strategies; define and reiterate expectations for staff; and make clear that the initiative will require collaboration across all divisions of the DOC.

Commitment from leadership is a necessary catalyst for change, but not sufficient in and of itself. Instituting change in corrections organizations requires a multi-level approach due to the hierarchical staffing structure. Leadership must recognize the influence and interdependence among all levels of staff when communicating priorities, and understand that everyone's professional behavior can contribute to reducing recidivism. In order to garner buy-in from front-line staff, for example, mid-level management must also demonstrate a commitment to recidivism reduction, as those managers typically interact with front-line staff more frequently than executive leaders.

3 Provide staff the tools they need.

Training staff in CCPs and EBPs is both an essential piece of any SRR initiative and a critical opportunity for corrections leaders to show staff that they value their skills and want them to thrive in their jobs. The integration of CCPs and EBPs may begin in the department's training academy, followed by ongoing training offered internally and externally, as well as recommended booster trainings. Staff surveys should be utilized to determine the areas in which staff require or want more training. Providing relevant and regular training that is tailored to the needs of your staff demonstrates your commitment to increasing staff expertise and shows staff that they are essential to the success of the recidivism-reduction initiative. Trainings should be reviewed annually to ensure that they align with the organization's goals for implementing EBPs.

Corrections staff also need to have a clear idea of how their specific roles fit into the broader statewide effort to reduce recidivism. Make sure that your staff understand the objectives of the initiative and how what they do each day contributes to the mission of the organization. Staff evaluations should not only measure the progress staff have made in orienting their professional behavior toward reducing recidivism, but also provide an avenue to coach staff on expected behaviors.

IN PRACTICE

To ensure that CCPs are implemented consistently, the Illinois DOC introduced CCP training into its officer training academy. In addition to training current corrections officers, the DOC trains all new cadets in CCPs prior to training them in operations such as handcuffing and cell extraction. This represents a major shift in the organization's priorities and emphasizes the important role that corrections staff can play in reentry outcomes.

4 Promote clear, consistent, and regular internal and external messaging.

Corrections leaders must have a communication strategy in place to engage and empower the staff who are expected to carry out a recidivism-reduction initiative at the ground level. Throughout the process of organizational change, leaders should present a consistent message to internal staff as well as external partners, community members, and the media. SRR grantee states have highlighted three rules to follow when messaging the new policies and practices that are being instituted to reduce recidivism.

- (1) Be Clear:** Make sure that your messaging is accessible to all, regardless of their level of training or education, or whether they work within or outside the DOC. Outline the mission, goals, and objectives of the initiative, reinforcing its direction and purpose in the long-term plan of the organization.
- (2) Be Concise:** Avoid lofty language. Conciseness reduces confusion and allows staff to glean the information that is relevant to their day-to-day tasks.
- (3) Be Thorough:** Provide a complete picture of the who, what, where, when, and why of the organizational change that is being promoted. Anticipate questions that staff may have regarding the changes being instituted and be prepared to answer those questions decisively and consistently.

IN PRACTICE

The administrators of community supervision within the Vermont DOC host open houses at their field offices, inviting community partners who work with people returning to their communities from incarceration. This type of event gives community members an opportunity to better understand corrections work and promotes transparency in a way that may garner outside support for the DOC's initiatives.

5 Show staff that the initiative is here to stay.

A common factor that contributes to a negative correctional culture is front-line staff's perception that new initiatives come and go, and thus do not require their attention or commitment. This attitude not only negatively impacts the overall culture of the organization, but also can hinder the progress of new initiatives. As the realignment of correctional culture takes place, you may encounter skepticism of leadership, disregard for authority, and "change fatigue"²—a sense of frustration, confusion, and exhaustion related to organizational change efforts—among front line staff. It is imperative to address these issues head-on in order to achieve long-term, sustainable change.

2. Nick Morgan, "Do You Have Change Fatigue?," *Harvard Business School Working Knowledge*, September 10, 2001, <http://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/do-you-have-change-fatigue>.

IN PRACTICE

In response to seeing a disproportionate number of people with mental health needs in its probation population, the Connecticut DOC made a commitment to train probation officers in cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), an evidence-based, mental health-focused practice that addresses criminogenic risk and needs. The state's probation department partnered with researchers at Central Connecticut State University (CCSU) to develop a series of CBT-based scripts for probation officers to follow during even the briefest contacts with the probation population. At the beginning of their partnership, CCSU was responsible for both training officers and reviewing their performance. Over time, the partners adopted a train-the-trainer approach, preparing a group of peer coaches in the probation department. These peer coaches now train new officers and provide refresher sessions to fellow staff, making CBT a regular practice in Connecticut's probation department that is set up for long-term implementation. This peer-to-peer learning fosters ownership, buy-in, and camaraderie among probation staff.

6 Use enthusiastic staff as a resource to encourage buy-in among their peers.

One of the most valuable resources corrections leaders can turn to in order to establish a culture that supports a new initiative is their own staff. When given the opportunity, staff can offer institutional knowledge to inform new policies and practices and drum up support for the initiative among their peers. Identify influential staff members who show enthusiasm for the initiative and enlist them as a core team of internal champions of change.

By consulting and engaging both management and non-management staff from corrections facilities, community supervision, and community services, you can ensure that change is enacted systemically—rather than on individual tracks—and that all departments are involved in supporting the initiative. Buy-in to system-wide change will increase if staff at all levels participate in driving that change.

7 Offer positive reinforcement early and often.

Because strengthening correctional culture takes time, it is important to acknowledge and reinforce small successes as they happen. Some organizations offer certificates or other types of formal recognition for officers and other front-line staff who exhibit excellent adherence to recidivism-reduction principles. Jurisdictions may utilize an employee-of-the-month model, for example, specifically to recognize staff who effectively use CCPs in their

job functions. But positive feedback can be less formal as well. If a staff member routinely completes comprehensive case notes accurately and on time, take a moment to offer verbal praise of his or her efforts during the next all-staff meeting. Or try walking around the facilities or visiting programs more frequently to show that you are invested in the work of your staff, demonstrate to staff that they are valued, and provide impromptu feedback.

Positive reinforcement does not have to wait until the initiative is in full swing and there are outcomes to report. Have periodic check-ins with different groups of staff from the start, not only to solicit their input, but also to commend progress and sustain engagement in the initiative.

8 Measure and report outcomes.

Apart from engaging policymakers and funders externally, there are distinct internal advantages to promoting favorable outcome data. Corrections staff want to see the results of their own efforts in reducing recidivism, facilitating program participation and completion, and improving other reentry outcomes for people who have been incarcerated in their state. Using data and process measures to promote positive correctional culture is essential to bringing about long-term, meaningful organizational change because it shows that their hard work is not in vain. When you can show your staff that the initiative is successful, that encourages even greater buy-in and creates a more amenable environment for future initiatives. Monitor change at different intervals and incorporate data collection as part of routine job duties to help mitigate staff anxiety and boost confidence that the process benefits all staff, as well as the people who are returning to their communities after incarceration. In addition to outcome data on recidivism, be sure to track process measures that reflect staff adherence to CCPs. Finally, incorporate those process measures into the employee review process and individual coaching sessions to provide timely feedback and guidance.

IN PRACTICE

The Illinois DOC works with a team of researchers at Southern Illinois University (SIU) to track recidivism outcomes related to their SRR grant and to improve evaluation practices as part of their long-term sustainability plan. In partnership with SIU, the DOC is developing an internal tool for evaluating staff on their incorporation of the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) principles into daily operations. Using this homegrown evaluation tool allows for customization to the specific needs of the Illinois DOC and its staff as well as consistency in the evaluation process over time.

This project was supported by Grant Nos. 2012-CZ-BX-K071 and 2016-MU-BX-K011 awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Office for Victims of Crime, and the SMART Office. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

About the NRRRC: The National Reentry Resource Center (NRRRC) was established in 2008 by the Second Chance Act (Public Law 110-199) and is administered by the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance. The NRRRC provides education, training, and technical assistance to state and local governments, tribal organizations, territories, community-based service providers, non-profit organizations, and correctional institutions working to improve reentry. To learn more about the NRRRC, visit csgjusticecenter.org/nrrc.



Justice Center
THE COUNCIL OF STATE GOVERNMENTS